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**NOAA FISHERIES APPROVES EXPANDED BOUNDARIES FOR
PROTECTED HABITAT AREA OFF FLORIDA'S EAST COAST
TO PROTECT OCULINA CORAL**

NOAA Fisheries has approved a measure proposed by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council measure to expand the boundaries of the Oculina Bank Habitat Area of Particular Concern (HAPC) and to establish two satellite protected areas in order to save delicate coral and the fish that thrive in its fragile colonies.

The SAFMC established the Oculina Bank HAPC off Ft. Pierce, Fla. in 1984 to protect a unique area containing *Oculina varicosa*, sometimes referred to as ivory tree coral. The bank, which lies in water ranging from 230 to 330 feet deep, consist of limestone pinnacles of up to 80 feet of relief covered with delicately branched *Oculina* coral. The extremely delicate and fragile coral grows slowly, less than a half inch per year, and forms spherical, branching thicket-like colonies that can stretch for hundreds of yards and reach heights of 15 feet.

According to the Council's habitat plan for the area, the Oculina Bank HAPC supports a highly diverse deepwater ecosystem that is comparable to tropical reefs. Its strong currents are thought to contribute to the growth of the coral, by trapping fine sand, mud and coral debris which act as habitat for dense populations of mollusks and crustaceans. In turn, those creatures serve as food for many kinds of commercial and recreational fish including red porgy, greater amberjack, and many species of snapper and grouper.

Because of this biological diversity, the area has been subjected to intense fishing pressure since the early 1960s. But fishing gear has had a devastating effect on the fragile coral. The 1984 designation of the Oculina Bank as an HAPC closed the area to mobile fishing gears like trawls and dredges but fishermen could still anchor their boats and use weights to send baits to the bottom. In 1994 the HAPC was also declared the Experimental Oculina Research Reserve and was closed to all bottom fishing for 10 years. In 1995, the closure was extended to include all anchoring within the EORR.

"Unfortunately, in recent years researchers have noted a precipitous decline in the number or the complete disappearance of many important and formerly abundant species from the *Oculina* habitat," said William Hogarth, administrator of NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region. "It appears that overfishing and habitat destruction have taken a toll on the Oculina Bank. We're hopeful that expanding the protected areas will be a major step toward sustaining what's left of Oculina Banks bio-diversity and facilitating its recovery."

The rule retains the western and southern boundaries of the existing Oculina Bank HAPC, moves the northern boundary 37 nautical miles to 28°30' north latitude, and moves the eastern boundary to the 100 fathom (600 ft; 183 m) contour. Furthermore, two 3-square nautical mile satellite Oculina HAPCs have been established. Satellite Oculina HAPC #1 is bounded on the north by 28°30' north latitude, on the south by 28°29' north latitude, on the east by 80°00' west longitude, and on the west by 80°03' west longitude. Satellite Oculina HAPC #2 is bounded on the north by 28°17' north latitude, on the south by 28°16' north latitude, on the east by 80°00' west longitude, and on the west by 80°03' west longitude. The rules will be effective on July 14, 2000.

Fishing with bottom longlines, bottom trawls, dredges, pots or traps is prohibited in these areas. Vessels may not anchor, use an anchor and chain, or use a grapple and chain anywhere in them, said Hogarth. We will prosecute violators to the fullest extent of the law.

Reports of fishery violations during weekly business hours should go to the Southeast Region Law Enforcement Division at (727) 570-5344, or after hours and weekends at its National Enforcement Hotline at (800) 853-1964.

The NMFS Web site includes a chart that shows the expanded Oculina HAPC as well as the two satellite HAPCs. To view the chart visit,
<http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov/fishery/newsbull.200/photos.000/nr00-032.jpg>

Principal steward of the nation's living marine resources, the National Marine Fisheries Service regulates the nation's commercial and recreational fisheries and manages species under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act throughout federal waters. An agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NMFS also protects marine and anadromous species under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act.